Identifying Employment Barriers for Tertiary-educated Muslim Australian Women

A research project conducted by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute in partnership with Women's Health West

Acknowledgements

Women's Health West acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, the people of the Kulin Nation, and we pay our respects to Elders and community members past and present. We express solidarity with the ongoing struggle for land rights, self-determination, sovereignty and the recognition of past injustices. We express our hope for reconciliation and justice.

Authors:
Richard Williams (University of Melbourne), Susan Timmins (Women's Health West), Deborah Warr (University of Melbourne), Ashrafalsadat Hosseini (University of Melbourne) and Sally Camilleri (Women's Health West)

Contents

Background

Women's Health West approached the University of Melbourne in 2014 about a possible anti-racism project to redress discrimination against Muslim women seeking employment. In discussion, this developed into a research project focusing on the barriers experienced by Muslim women who had tertiary qualifications either gained or recognised in Australia. This was informed by the experience of staff from Women's Health West, who encountered Muslim women for whom lack of English or formal qualifications were not barriers, but who continued to have more difficulty than their non-Muslim counterparts finding employment. It appeared that there were other factors at work. The parties decided to use the small amount of funding available to investigate this further.

Summary of existing research

Melbourne University research staff undertook a review of both academic and grey literature concerning the employment seeking experiences by people of Muslim faith and racial discrimination more broadly.

There is a small but significant body of Australian research into the experiences of Muslim people seeking employment in Australia and the range of factors that affect this. The most substantial recent study is by Lovat et al (2011). It found considerable evidence in Western countries, including Australia, that migrants from different linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds struggle to obtain and maintain employment, and that this has negative impacts upon social inclusion. Melbourne University researchers found that, in Australia this disadvantage was particularly pronounced for women. According to 2016 ABS figures, the workforce participation rate for 'working age' Muslim women was 42 per cent, compared to 72 per cent of all 'working age' Australian women. The rate for 'working age' Muslim men was 70 per cent, compared to 81 per cent for all 'working age' Australian men (Das 2018).

This is unlikely to be equally distributed. Foroutan (2008a) found that some groups of Muslim women in Australia, such as those from Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Caribbean and Pacific Islands, have higher employment levels than others. Foroutan observes "on the one hand, North African, Middle Eastern and Lebanese non-Muslims are more than twice as likely as Muslims from the same region/country of origin to be employed; on the other hand, there is a very small difference in employment rates between Muslim people and non-Muslim people from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean and Pacific Islands and from Eastern Europe" (Foroutan 2008a:230). Although the figures in Fouratan's report are dated, the variations they point to remain significant to this report.

Lovat et al (2011) also collected extensive qualitative data. They found evidence of ethnic and religious discrimination by employers and others, with Muslim people of African or Middle-Eastern appearance experiencing the most negative reactions. This is supported by other studies in Australia (Hewitt 2007; Syed & Pio 2010), and in the US and Britain (Ali, Yamada & Mahmood 2015; Bagley & Abubaker 2017; Harrison 2016; King & Ahmad 2010). They also found that time since arrival in Australia was of major significance, and that the experiences of Muslim jobseekers was far from uniform (Lovat et al. 2011).

A 2012 study conducted in Sydney by the Australian Muslim Women's Association explored the effect of cultural and religious interpretations and an emerging Australian Muslim identity on Muslim women's engagement in the workforce. This study focused on women who self-identified as 'practicing' Muslim women. The women interviewed raised a number of common concerns related to workforce participation. Women identified various factors as limiting to their ability to access career opportunities, including the prevalence of alcohol in the workplace, a lack of respect and understanding regarding religious requirements in the workplace and norms related to physical contact with men (particularly shaking hands) and, in some cases, the requirement of husbands' permission to work. The majority of respondents were young, Australian educated women who came from a predominantly Arabic

background. Of the women who participated in the study, 81 per cent wore a hijab and many of these informants reported feeling greater discrimination at work. Overall, participants reported willingness by government and business employers to accommodate their religious needs, though reports of increased experiences of discrimination by women wearing a hijab demonstrate the limitations of government and business strategies to eliminate discrimination within the workplace. Women in this majority group frequently reported that they were less likely to be considered for more professional careers, or for career advancement opportunities, and felt unable to meet corporate and cultural requirements with relation to dress and appearance.

The same study noted that Imams were largely of the opinion that Muslim women must obtain their husband's consent for work, even if this had been written in a pre-nuptial agreement. However, Imams were unable to provide scriptural references for their opinions. Much of the report reflected on the cultural interpretation of the Islamic religion by conservative religious and family leaders and the effect of this on the opportunities for women to participate in the workforce. These cultural views discouraged competitive or male dominated areas of employment and even questioned whether women had the ability to undertake paid employment (Ihram 2013).

A range of smaller studies have identified additional factors. Muslim women participants in a 2007 study reported that support from their extended families was an important factor in enabling them to return to work after having children. The researchers found that cultural norms within the Muslim community were becoming less restrictive towards women gaining employment (Scott & Franzmann 2007). Foroutan (2008) found that familial factors and education was more strongly correlated with achieving employment than religion. Foroutan concluded that low levels of employment might be better explained by socio-cultural factors, such as women's low employment participation in particular Muslim countries and the maintenance of traditional gender norms and expectations associated with the role of women in families and the work and responsibilities that they should undertake in their households. The significantly low employment level of Muslim women that Foroutan found was predominantly among Muslim women from the North African and Middle East region, including Lebanon (Foroutan 2008b). In contrast, a recent Western Australian study found that some workplaces and types of work are less accessible for Muslim women because of their community's religious beliefs and customs (Samani 2013).

With regard to anti-Muslim sentiment more generally, news media periodically include polls showing high levels of intolerance towards Muslim people (Hadley 2016; Karp 2017; Parmar 2016). However, researchers have cautioned against accepting these findings at face value. Markus (2016) explains that the way respondents are selected and the way options are framed can substantially influence the findings. Drawing on more substantive research, Hassan (2017) claims that 'while there are pockets of antipathy towards Muslims, an overwhelming majority of Australians don't share that antipathy'. This claim is supported by research by Huntley (2017).

The contributors to an edited report, *Islamophobia in Australia: 2014-2016* (Iner, 2017), support the claim that Australian society and culture is predominantly inclusive. However, they also raise concern about an apparent increase in exclusivist individuals and political entities that view Australia as a Christian country "with no place for Muslims in its society". The contributors contend that "Islamophobia is turning into a normalised political rhetoric as the anti-Islamic far-right groups become louder in the political arena" (*ibid*:3). In this study, Pearson notes that Islamophobia now plays a key role in three major Australian political parties, two of which expound an exclusivist point of view (the Christian Democratic Party and Rise Up Australia Party), in addition to Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party (*ibid*:14). Briskman and Latham note that at least six anti-Muslim political parties contested the 2016 Federal election, with Pauline Hanson's One Nation being the most successful, claiming four senate seats (*ibid*:17). They also report a sharp increase in overtly anti-Muslim sentiment on social media (*ibid*:20) and Matthews notes a rise in the number of news and media reports that are pejorative and disparaging of Muslims, often in the wake of terrorist incidents locally and overseas. (*ibid*:33)

The *Islamophobia in Australia* report also analyses 243 verified incidents of Islamaphobic abuse reported, by community members, to the Islamophobia Register Australia between September 2014 and December 2015. The Islamophobia Register is a not-for-profit initiative that provides victims and witnesses of Islamophobia with a platform to report their experiences. In their contribution to the report, Iner, Zayied and Vergani point out that these reported incidents are likely to represent a small sample of the Islamophobia experienced by Muslim Australians, both on and offline. The authors' analysis of the verified reports revealed that women were more likely to be victims of Islamophobia and that the perpetrators were largely men. Women were identified as victims in 67.7 percent of cases where gender was reported. Women, especially those wearing an Islamic head covering (79.6 per cent of female victims) were found to be the main targets of Islamophobia. In 56.6 per cent of incidents reported, religious clothing was explicitly mentioned by the perpetrator. Further, the severity of abuse experienced by 'visibly Muslim' women was elevated, often including misogynistic remarks (such as calling the victim a "bitch," "whore," etc.), followed by 'insults targeting religion,' 'xenophobic insults' and 'association with terrorism'(Iner 2017:5). The authors of the report note that Muslim women are more easily identifiable than Muslim men because of their Islamic attire and that this heightens their exposure to Islamophobic abuse.

Iner *et al* also report that the workplace does not appear as frequently as some other locations (such as shopping centres, train stations, near a mosque etc.) in cases analysed from the Islamophobia Register. The authors note that when victims did report a workplace incident, in most cases the perpetrator was a customer at the victim's workplace.

Research design

In the early stages of the project a concise literature review was undertaken, scanning Australian research in the first instance, then international research from countries with comparable economic and social profiles to Australia. The review found sufficient evidence of specific barriers faced by Muslim jobseekers in Australia (and Muslim women in particular) to provide a context in which this project could usefully focus on the lived experience of tertiary-qualified Muslim women jobseekers in Melbourne's west.

Six focus group discussions were planned; four comprised of 6-8 tertiary-educated Muslim Australian women living in Melbourne's west, who were currently seeking or had recently found employment (within the last 3 months), and two groups comprising 6-8 men from families affected by barriers to employment for Muslim women. A minimum target of 12 Muslim women jobseekers who fitted the selection criteria was set. No target was set for the men's groups as the project was primarily interested in the lived experiences of women.

These selection criteria were modified early in the project to include women who had been unable to find work commensurate with their education and had taken lower-skilled jobs. It also became apparent that the criteria 'Muslim women' excluded women who were culturally Muslim but did not want to identify as such, preferring to identify as Australian. However, they were likely to be identified by prospective employers as Muslim, so were relevant to the study. The criterion was changed to 'women of Muslim background'.

In addition, it was planned to conduct up to five individual interviews with key informants who had relevant experience to comment on this topic. These could be employers, people from employment services or community leaders.

The four focus groups for women were conducted by women, one of whom was a woman of Muslim faith. All focus group participants were recompensed for travel costs. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed, then analysed thematically.

Primary findings

The findings reported here are through the stories and words of the informants. Interpretation of these findings are limited to the selection of the extracts and identification of the themes under which they are organised. Analysis of these findings can be found in the discussion section.

1. Applying for work

There are several aspects of this theme. All of the women interviewed were either looking for work or were only recently employed so data on this topic constitutes the greater part of the research findings. Some of the women interviewed who were looking for work were also working, but in a lower-skilled job not related to their professional qualifications. Many women spoke of the ongoing cycle of searching for jobs, writing and submitting applications, waiting for replies, attending interviews and being unsuccessful and reflected on the toll this took on them and their families.

One informant estimated that she submitted about five applications a week, another said she had submitted about a hundred applications in two years, and a third informant, who is a registered nurse, said 'I think I've applied to every single hospital, nursing home. Name it, I've applied for it'.

Two women in one of the focus groups had applied for positions at a workplace that advertised a number of positions that appealed to them and were relevant to their qualifications. They felt very confident about their applications and said that their qualifications and experience were very well aligned with the key selection criteria, and that the fit was 'pretty perfect'. However neither was successful:

> It took them like two months to get back to us and tell us no. So, I was going to call them and be like, what happened? I felt like I qualified for that.

Some women reported that they were successful in getting interviews, though not in securing a position and said they found it very difficult to get feedback about their interviews. A number of informants were keen to receive feedback that might assist them in future interviews and often sought this from prospective employers. Some received no feedback, and those who did, reported that it contained no useful information. One woman said:

> …they always respond by saying 'sorry you don't fit within our criteria, you are unsuccessful, you don't have the experience'. It's like they copy and paste the same thing.

For women who were working, but seeking promotion into positions better aligned with their qualifications and experience, feedback within the workplace was also difficult to find and sometimes it was misleading. For example, one respondent, a qualified dietician working in a clerical role in a major hospital, was repeatedly unsuccessful in her attempts to be promoted to a nutritionist assistant position. She explained that:

I've got the full qualification and I was not employed. I went in and spoke to the manager and told her, "Why? What would you like me to do to be able to do that job?" She said to me there's a certificate called Certificate III in Dietetics…It's a nutrition and dietetic Allied Health course…it's a Certificate III or Certificate II. I asked those people who were employed as a nutritionist assistant, 'Do you have that qualification?' They said 'no'.

Women commonly reported taking jobs well below their qualification level. Those who did find work frequently did so in an area in which their cultural difference, languages and refugee or migrant status were advantages, though again, these roles were often not related, or commensurate to their field of qualification. For example, a woman of Iraqi background who is a qualified engineer found work with a Migrant Information Centre providing employment assistance to other Arabic-speaking women. Speaking of her clients, she said that:

Knowing the African community, they'll have professional qualifications and come into our organisation and want to do admin work. One lady was a doctor in Nigeria and wants to work here as an admin person because she's struggling to find a job in her profession.

The effects of this repeated rejection were clear, one informant describing each rejection as being 'like a bite in my heart' and that for a few days following each unsuccessful application she did not want to talk to anyone. She became so depressed that she was admitted to a mental health facility for two months. Another woman spoke of her decreased confidence over time, and that she became apprehensive about finding work. She said that she felt:

Scared. Scared not to be accepted. Even if I get accepted and start working there, how are people going to treat me in that department?

One of the key informants who worked with this client group explained the impact of the long and draining process:

If we're talking about consequences, it could be mental health in some extreme cases. If your confidence is killed and if you don't feel worthy of contributing in society, that's the worst feeling and that could cause depression and so many other mental health complications. I've worked with a few clients from some communities and one of the major causes of their severe mental health issues is having nothing to do. They got sick of it. They said they did everything and there was no job for them.

The passing of time is important. It takes time to realise the difficulties of the task and that success can be elusive, to reassess one's situation and to develop alternative or additional strategies. All the while the relevance of one's qualifications and experience is diminishing. The transition and the dilemmas are captured in this extended quote from a woman who undertook an Australian undergraduate degree in nutrition but who had had no success in finding work in the field, although she was still keen to do so:

I didn't forget about it. I spent so many years. I'm paying HECS for it. I was seven days working and studying, so I was working weekends, Friday afternoon,

Wednesday afternoon and I was studying five days a week, so it was full on. I can't just forget about it…it was my dream'. It's still my dream but every time I think I'm going to do that, I just… something just holds me back. I'm not going to be successful in that. Maybe my accent, maybe sometimes I don't understand English the way they do and my academic knowledge and writing and critical thinking, I've kind of lost those things now. It's been a long time. I've lost it, yeah, I've lost it…I feel I've lost it.

Several women reported that, while they had embarked on their studies due to a belief in the vocational value of higher education, they had come to regret the time and money they expended, as they had no evidence that this had improved their employability. One woman spoke of this frustration:

…at some point you get annoyed, because you feel like, you have graduated a whole Bachelor degree, and you're just like; why am I not qualified enough?

Another woman, a qualified, registered nurse currently working below her qualification in an aged care facility, expressed a similar, strong sense of regret and disappointment:

…I have the credits that I have and the results and…I'm like, so what do I do? And then it turns you off… I was turned off by nursing for a whole two years. The only reason I went back [to nursing] was because I was getting [pressure] from my whole family, everywhere I go. If I knew this when I was applying I would never have done it, I would never have gone into the field. I would have just done a diploma course, would've been working the same way anyway.

Both women express a degree of powerlessness. They had believed the maxim that education is the path to employment, only to discover that it is only one of several contributors to employability.

Women spoke of the significance of employment experience, and of how their applications were unsuccessful because they lacked necessary experience. One woman had come to the conclusion that:

Education is not as important here as a developing country and experience is more important.

This is the dilemma faced by many job seekers; that of needing experience to find work but needing work to gain experience. As one woman noted:

…they're all asking for experiences and I'm like, I don't have the experience because I've just graduated…my clinical appraisals, clinical book, that can show you the experience I have, because I was one of the top [students] *in my classes.*

A woman in the same group, who holds a health promotion qualification, recounted that when she sought feedback following an unsuccessful job interview she was told that the job was given to someone with more relevant experience. She asked for clarification and was then told that that the job was given to someone who was already working in the health promotion sector.

The person who got that job, she already had her foot in the door, but I was trying to start off, so I think that's the only difference…. I was quite angry because I thought, it's always coming down to experience.

2. Other strategies

The women interviewed had developed a range of strategies for dealing with their situation. The most common response was to take any position they could find with a hope of working their way towards their goals. This commonly meant taking work in often low paid, feminised sectors, or in jobs where women's language abilities and cultural knowledge would be an advantage for their employer. Indeed, some informants had been encouraged to retrain in childcare or aged care. A key informant reported that Muslim women could find work in retail in localities with high concentrations of Muslim refugees and migrant communities. This was particularly the case for women who could be identified as Muslim, due to their dress.

Some women, being unable to attain paid positions, undertook volunteer work just to get access to a workplace and to gain experience, in hope that this would make them more appealing to prospective employers. One woman had decided to take a break from applying for work, and to spend a year doing relevant volunteer work. Another was doing volunteer work in the health promotion field to increase her experience, 'just starting slow, then building my way up', she explained. Another informant had begun voluntary work while still a refugee in Turkey, waiting for resettlement. She wanted to keep engaged with other people and helped others with their resettlement applications and by translating their statements and stories. In Australia she found work in refugee services.

3. Mentors and networks

One of the women seeking work had a mentor, a family friend who worked in human resources. After completing post-graduate studies she started applying for work the following year. As she explained, 'I just started banging them [applications] out…I wasn't really taking my time with it, and then after a while, I got a mentor'. The young woman reported that her mentor assisted her to understand the process of responding to selection criteria and encouraged her to make herself known to potential employers by calling them before applying for a job. At the time of the focus group she had not found a job and had been invited to only one interview.

One of the key informants spoke of the value of the mentoring she had received from a supervisor of a final year of university, during a work placement:

Instead of doing a short few months, my placement was about seven months. So, I think that really helped me. The lady I was supervised by took me to all these networking meetings and was really keen on making it more than a placement for me and trying to give me an opportunity to meet different people in the community services sector. It was through her support that I was able to meet a few people who said, once I finished my degree, I could touch base with them and they'd be able to support and assist me. That was really good. For me,

> *I know what got me where I am today was my support early on with some of that.*

In her community development role in local government, where she was employed at the time of the interview, she was in involved in a relatively new initiative to build networks of women who were specifically interested in helping Muslim women and other women from diverse backgrounds to develop their business skills. This had drawn considerable interest from women volunteering to be mentors, but the initiative had not been operating for long enough to have demonstrated employment outcomes.

Experience with community networks also emerged in the interviews with women seeking work, although attitudes towards these networks differed. Three women in one of the focus groups had joined a community advisory group that was also attended by women who were working in the health promotion field. They found this helpful for building networks and gaining experience.

When asked about whether she thought her community could support her in finding a job, one informant replied:

> *I don't think, no. Not at all, I don't think. I don't see my community in the workforce so I can't really get that support, as in someone to find me a job or anything like this. I do participate in a lot of events in the community but I hardly see anyone working…*

Although community networks might, in some cases, provide employment opportunities, these tended to be limited to lower paid positions in family businesses. It takes a long time for members of newly arrived communities to find their way into the workforce and be able to support others to do the same.

Not all women interviewed found formal and informal networks helpful. One key informant described how, after arriving in Australia as a refugee with her young child, she intentionally separated herself from the ethnic community networks she might have drawn on, as she wanted to make her way in her new country on her own terms. She recognised that these networks could have been a source of employment for her and a way of avoiding the discrimination encountered in more mainstream workplaces. This key informant, now working as an employment consultant for AMES Australia, explained that 'middle-eastern or Muslim business owners, they employ their friends, daughters of their friends, get them into their businesses, […] so that's when the woman has an opportunity to squeeze in and find a job'.

Explaining her choice not to use contacts in her community, she said:

> *Because if I'm going to find a job through a contact it's as if I'm not skilled enough and not up to it, you know. It's just because I know someone. I wanted to find a job because I'm skilled and I can do it. So, I took the difficult way, by choice. And then if I find a job through someone I know, I will need to, kind of, get connections with people I might not want to be connected to, for the sake of the job.*

For women who were not part of them, networks that operated in particular workplaces or professions were exclusive. As Bourdieu (1986) proposed in his concept of social capital, the advantages of networks for their members lies as much

in who they exclude as who they include. One of the informants who had trained in Australia as a nurse explained that of all of the Muslim women she knew who had studied nursing, even those who graduated years before her, only three had secured work. She explained that:

> *People that know people get the job, like if I had a friend or, like, family member, somebody who is already working in the ward, they can probably get you in.*

One woman reported that she had often been told that their applications were unsuccessful because they lacked experience, and another said:

> *I feel like people use that as an excuse though, experience. It's more networking. I feel like people who know each other get in...*

4. Family support and expectations

The roles played by families of job-seekers was complex. A woman in one focus group spoke of the pressure she felt from her family because she had not found a job. She said:

> *It's like; Did you graduate? What are you doing?'.*

Another woman in the focus group spoke of the way her family shares her disappointment when she doesn't get a job she has applied for.

> *They are on the journey with us… they are very supportive… but I feel really bad for them when they look at me and I'm down. You carry guilt with you as well.*

This young woman stated that, if she were to get an interview for a job, she probably would not tell her parents because she wants to spare them the disappointment. In response, another participant said:

> *I think all of our parents, I can say, they brought us to Australia for us to have better opportunities, and if you don't find work, it's almost like, what's the point? But you just have to keep trying.*

Another informant, on the topic of family support said:

> *My husband is very supportive. He said he is going to help out with the kids and I know he did last time*

However, another woman, who was separated from her husband shared a quite different story. Her former husband held postgraduate qualifications and received extensive support from the Brotherhood of St Laurence to find a job, support that she had arranged for him. She was undertaking tertiary study at the time. She explained that she felt denigrated by her husband. He resented her achievements, her superior English, and the greater ease with which she engaged in social networks. After her husband left the marriage she began to participate in '…all these programs to be able to bring myself up again and move on'.

5. Agencies and support services

Experience of employment agencies was mixed. One woman had recently found an agency that offered to train her and introduce her to their peer support system. Another recounted that the agency she used were initially helpful and assisted her to get the only interview she had attended, but that after that she did not hear any more from them and had disengaged from the service. Another reported that her advisor changed more than five times, and that each time she attended an appointment she was assisted by a different person. Another woman reported that she had successfully found a job with the help of an employment agency and that, while the job was not in her field of qualification, she had found agency staff to be responsive and supportive.

6. Impacts on identity

A number of informants described ways they had modified elements of their identity in attempt to secure employment, or to be more accepted in their workplace. Indeed, to the observer, some of the adaptations they reported making would seem to cut deeply into identity. One participant spoke about being advised (by others in her community) to change her name on her resume and for job applications. Another informant had agreed to use a different name when working in a call centre. She said that she noticed a difference in the way customers treated her when she did this.

An informant who was interviewed individually had gone much further, changing both her name and her religion. After many unsuccessful attempts to find work she undertook training as a hairdresser, where she made a friend who introduced her to the Bahá'í community. She recounted that:

> *I have converted to Bahá'í, and they advised me to change my name to an Australian name, and it really worked. It was the best advice that I have received during those years looking for a job. They've also helped me to find a job in my field in a foreign company. I started to enjoy my life.*

However, while she found a welcoming and supportive community, she lost her ties with her family:

> *After I converted to Bahá'í they became very upset with me and even some of them – my brothers and sisters - cut their relationship with me.*

Job seekers from refugee and migrant backgrounds can sometimes benefit from their cultural identity, knowledge and linguistic capacity. For example, an informant stated that middle-eastern business owners were more likely to employ people from their own community.

> *They employ their friends, daughters of their friends, get them into their businesses.*

It was also noted that businesses in Dandenong, for example, whose customers are largely from middle-eastern countries, prefer to employ Muslim women in customer service positions. However, such positions are not commensurate with the qualifications and ambitions of the women consulted for this research.

7. Discrimination

While there is clear evidence of discrimination against Muslim women seeking employment and career advancement, these are drawn from larger numbers of informants than involved in this study. It is more difficult to say unequivocally that the individual stories recounted here are the result of racism. At an individual level many other factors come into play, the effect of which diminishes in larger research samples. For example, one of the key informants, a black African Australian woman, explained that:

> I constantly have that battle and I feel like I'm not valued or respected enough in conversations with people. I do sometimes wonder if it's in my head or actually happening around me, but when I have encounters with people where I try to provide info or feedback and I get knocked back, I think is it because I'm a young woman or because English is not my first language and I must be misunderstanding the instructions or whatever it may be.

Nevertheless, how the informants interpreted their situation is important. The above informant had come to Australia as a child refugee. She has high English proficiency, having lived and studied in Australia for most of her life, though she observed that people often assumed she did not, based on her appearance and that this influenced the way they judged her and her capacity to undertake her work and study. She reported that she did not experience discrimination until she engaged in tertiary education:

> [In] tute groups, I was probably the only Muslim and black person enrolled in the degree at the time. The only person of African descent. There were some things, like people not wanting me to be in their group because English was not my first language and that I was going to drag the group back a little bit and make it hard for them to achieve the marks they wanted to achieve. I'm one of those people where, if I'm in a group, I don't feel the need to speak unless I have to. People hadn't heard me speak, so there was a lot of assumptions made about me.

In the second example she gave, the racism is unmistakable:

> I remember one of my tutors saying she considered herself to be a silent racist in that she has views and feelings about people that she understands are racist but she doesn't act on them, but when I looked at the grades she was giving me… I would take some of my essays to other tutors that I was close to and would have conversations with. I would ask how I could get high distinctions and distinctions in every other subject, when she's just barely passing me. I would ask them to go over my essays and they would say I should I have gotten at least a distinction for this. Clearly, she's saying she doesn't act on it, but her subconscious is at work.

This informant had previously worked with Victoria Police as a liaison officer, supporting increased recruitment from diverse communities.

> I found it quite interesting that you have people who are trying to really push for recruitment and I was supportive with some of that. We would go into

communities and try to sell a career in Victoria Police, and yet, as soon as they go into work placement, they have senior sergeants saying you won't make it and no-one will take you seriously because you don't look or sound like the rest of us.

One informant spoke about an aged care facility where she had worked casually for six years. By her account, the manager told her that, when she graduated from university, she would be able to progress to a higher position as a registered nurse (RN). When she graduated, the manager arranged for her to be buddied up with a more senior staff member for a week, after which time it was understood that she would be able to move into a higher position. Unfortunately, this manager left the organisation and a new manager was appointed. The new manager was not willing to continue with the arrangements made between the informant and her former manager. She claimed that no RN positions were available. However, every week a new RN would come and do a shift and soon four new RNs had been hired by the new manager. The informant said that the new recruits were:

All blonde Aussie girls, every single one…all the girls she hired all seemed to look the same.

Some thought that lack of experience was often used as an excuse, or cover for racial or cultural discrimination.

It's an excuse, I reckon…because it's another way of them just saying, alright, we're not hiring you because of your name, or whatever…

She went on to say that a lot of non-Muslim girls that she graduated with were offered graduate years at very high-profile hospitals that are hard to get into, such as the Royal Children's hospital. She repeated the final year of her degree in an effort to improve her competitiveness for graduate position. During that time only two Muslim women were offered a graduate position, one in each year.

Informants also reported that some employers are reluctant to hire Muslim women due to concerns about how their customers, or clients might respond. For example, an informant provided the following account. The business owner in question might have been motivated by his own prejudice, or he might have been concerned about how his customers would respond, if he hired a Muslim woman:

I have a close friend who is a convert. She wears a hijab but her name doesn't reflect any of her Islamic background. She applied for a job and interviewed well. She was actually over-qualified for that job. During the interview, the manager said they really liked her but asked if he could make a request. The area she would be working in is not multicultural and the clients and customers are mainly Anglo Saxons. They said, if they offered the job, could they request that she came without her hijab to work, so the customers felt more comfortable? She was annoyed and also disappointed because this was clear discrimination. She said it's not a fair request and no, she wasn't going to go ahead. It was a fish and chip shop; not an office or something. She asked my opinion. I said if she wanted, she could go to Fair Work and say this, but she didn't follow through. She said he may have a fair point because at the end of the day, he's the owner of the business. I think that was really disappointing for her. I had to speak with her and debrief, so that really was a sad incident. That case tells a lot, where

someone is qualified and the manager likes everything, but the only thing is that he assumes customers may go away because of this hijabi woman.

Discrimination is insidious, in this case operating through assumptions people make about the prejudice of others. This effect was reinforced by another account:

They worry about their customers, they might lose customers or clients because they deal with a lot of white-collar employers and this is their clients, this is how they get business. They might be afraid that, they don't want someone with a scarf to represent their company. I actually had another interview who actually said it. It was in the city, it was for recruitment consultant position. The interview took an hour. He was really nice… he said 'you have all the skills and I really want you, but I'm not sure about my clients'…He said 'You will be very good as an account manager', so I don't have to deal with anyone outside.

Many accounts referred to dress, particularly hair covering. After a year of looking for work, one of the informants found a part-time job in local government. She explained that:

…it was good for me to survive emotionally and financially. First, I was very happy as I had a job after all those struggles, but after a few months I began to feel bad and became depressed… The workplace and culture were awful…I was wearing scarf and people in there did not have respect for Muslims. It was not a friendly place to work and therefore after eight months, I gave up.

A key informant, whose job was to help migrant and refugee women establish small businesses, drew on both her personal and professional experience when speaking about cultural differences. The following extract is not certain evidence of discrimination, yet the informant is clearly affected by it.

For some reason, the culture in that organisation wasn't so welcoming. For example, I was having my lunch all by myself. They would go together as a group… they would just avoid the time that I go.

Situations of this kind are common to work places and are part of many people's experience. The effect is cumulative, leading to what Sennett and Cobb (1977) identified as 'hidden injuries'.

The observance of religious beliefs and practices was also a site of discrimination. The ability to observe Muslim prayer times is becoming easier as prayer rooms become more common, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon and far from universal. The following evidence, from three key informants illustrates this. The first recalled that for many years she could not pray properly at work which caused her distress. At the time of the interview she was working at a Christian-affiliated welfare organisation, which had provided a room where she and others could pray:

They changed the name now to quiet room, either atheist or Muslim or Christian or any other religion can go in, have whatever practice they want. That's where I go and do my prayers.

The second key informant worked in programmes for young migrant women:

In a lot of cases, it works out for some of the girls, but I certainly am aware of situations where some people have been made so uncomfortable that they've had to leave the organisation because they feel they're constantly questioned about the time they have to go and pray…A lot of women feel a little bit afraid because they're worried that if they go to a place, or have an interview conversation about some things they'll need support with, like fasting, taking time off to celebrate Eid, travel or wearing the hijab. I know some of the girls I talk to are too afraid to tell them about cultural catering stuff, like halal meat in meetings and stuff like that. A lot of people would say they feel bad about asking and just say they're vegetarian.

The third key informant is an active member of the Muslim community. He spoke about how problems can often be the result of the way employers approach the issue:

As Muslims, we have to pray five times a day and so on. When employers think of employing a Muslim, they just think of those barriers rather than the opportunities; this person will bring a lot of diversity and a lot of understanding. You could be very clear of your conditions of employment; if you think there is a clear clash, you can make it clear, but if there's no clash, then what is the fear?

Secondary findings

Although the research team put considerable effort into recruiting informants to the study, they had difficulty in finding people for the focus group discussions. Ultimately, 12 women participated in the focus groups. No participants were recruited for the men's focus groups. There was no difficulty finding individuals willing to be interviewed as key informants, except for employers.

Whilst the research team understood that the Muslim community in Melbourne comes from a number of different countries and that it would be necessary to keep groups for Sunni and Shia separate, the team did not understand the significance of the additional divisions based on country or place of origin. In Melbourne, many of these different communities are quite small, which limited the possibility of confidentiality in focus group discussions. Hence several potential participants were unwilling to participate in group interviews.

In addition, in the face of heightened anti-Muslim sentiment, including at times hostility and violence, Muslim communities felt threatened and unsafe. This was clear in the research team's communications with the consulted individuals and community groups. In the face of the elevated and unwelcome attention to which they were subject, these communities tended to respond by maintaining a low public profile.

One of the community leaders we approached for advice wrote to us that:

> …the continued attention and focus on Islam and Muslims is counter productive, as most of my community members are feeling that participating in this fuels the attention and focus …People had enough and want to move forward out of this issue, because it is not helping their children at school and on the street

This was exacerbated by the disproportionate curiosity of social researchers in the growing Muslim population in Australia. Significant immigration from Muslim countries is a relatively new phenomenon in this country.

Discussion

The small scale and confined focus of this research exposed details of variations and complexity that are less likely to be revealed in larger scale, or population surveys. Many of the experiences that the women jobseekers recounted were common to the great majority of people attempting to enter the job market. While higher education still provides a competitive edge, it is no longer the guarantee of employment that it once was. Insecure casualised employment with low pay and poor working conditions is becoming normalised across many of the advanced economies (Standing 2011). The demand for experience and the diminishing readiness of firms to provide on-the-job training has led to the expectation of people undertaking voluntary work, or unpaid internships as a prelude to employment, albeit an unreliable one (Oliver et al. 2016).

However, the women in this study experienced additional barriers. The examples of discrimination that the women described were consistent with the research outlined in the literature review. Informants provided accounts of racial, cultural and religious discrimination. Other types of discrimination, based on gender or age, for example, were also identified by the women, but not with the consistency of religious discrimination.

Research at this scale also reveals the complexity of lived experience and the extent to which it is shaped by interpretation. Some women accepted what they were told; that their lack of relevant work experience was the reason their applications were repeatedly rejected. Others interpreted this as an excuse to mask anti-Muslim sentiment. These different interpretations placed the women differently in relation to the problems they faced, and would likely lead each to respond differently.

This presents a challenge to agencies that provide services to women such as the informants in this study. It is not possible to research all clients in this way to understand this complexity and difference. The growing trend of co-production of services offers an alternative approach, one that brings these nuances and different ways of knowing into the operation of service agencies[1].

Based on the experiences of the women interviewed for this research, it is likely that interventions will be required at a number of levels in order to redress employment discrimination against Muslim women in Melbourne's west. The initial hurdles women described, in terms of advancing through the job application process and securing interviews, could be mitigated by practices that seek to guard against discrimination and unconscious bias, such as blind-recruitment. Given the experiences described by community women and considering research indicating increasing Islamophobia in Australian communities, discrimination experienced at face-to-face interviews (a process integral to most employment opportunities) presents a further challenge. It is possible that workplace anti-racism and unconscious bias training in organisations

---

[1] A commonly used definition of co-production is by Slay & Stephens, (2013:4): *'A relationship where professionals and citizens share power to plan and deliver support together, recognising that both partners have vital contributions to make in order to improve quality of life for people and communities'*

across Melbourne's west could assist with this. Employers should also be encouraged to account for recruitment decisions by recording the process and rationale of post-interview decision making, with specific reference to key selection criteria and deliverables for advertised roles. Such record keeping would not only be of benefit to an organisation, should questions related to recruitment choices be raised, but would also permit employers to give more detailed, purposeful feedback to unsuccessful interviewees. This is something many research informants reported they would value and appreciate.

The women interviewed for this research also suggested that opportunities for Muslim women to hone their job application and interview skills would be valuable, as would increased opportunities for structured professional work-experience, networking and mentorship. Such programs could be successfully implemented via partnerships between educational institutions, community organisations, recruitment agencies and the business community/employers.

Finally, based on the experiences described by research informants, Muslim women in the workforce (and those seeking work) could also benefit from programs to enhance their knowledge of employment rights and avenues for seeking advice and redress when they experience discrimination, or when employers are unable to provide consistent and clear processes, advice and reasoning related to the allocation of duties, roles and career progression opportunities within their organisation.

References

Ali, SR, Yamada, T & Mahmood, A 2015, 'Relationships of the practice of hijab, workplace discrimination, social class, job stress, and job satisfaction among Muslim American women', *Journal of Employment Counseling*, no. 4, p. 146.

Bagley, C & Abubaker, M 2017, 'Muslim Woman Seeking Work: An English Case Study with a Dutch Comparison, of Discrimination and Achievement', *Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 1

Bourdieu, P 1986, 'The Forms of Capital', in Richardson, J (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Greenwood, New York, pp. 241-258.

Das, S 2018, 'Fact check: Are more than half of Australia's working-age Muslims not in the workforce?', *RMIT ABC Fact Check*, Thursday 6 March 2018, viewed Monday 03 March 2019.

Foroutan, Y 2008a, 'Employment Differentials of Second-Generation Muslim Immigrants: Assimilation and Discrimination Hypotheses', *Immigrants & Minorities*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 219-241.

Foroutan, Y 2008b, 'Women's Employment, Religion and Multiculturalism: Socio-Demographic Emphasis', *Journal of Population Research*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 63-90.

Hadley, R 2016, 'Poll knocks the socks off the latte-sipping lefties', *The Daily Telegraph*, September 23, 2016, NewsCorp, viewed 28th February 2017.

Harrison, KA 2016, 'Hiding under the Veil of Dress Policy - Muslim Women, Hijab, and Employment Discrimination in the United States', *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law*, vol. 17, no. 3

Hassan, R 2017, 'Australians aren't as Islamophobic as we're led to believe', *The Conversation*, 27th February 2017, viewed 28th February 2017.

Hewitt, A 2007, 'It's Not because you Wear a Hijab, Its because You're Muslim: Inconsistencies in South Australia's Discrimination Laws', *Law and Justice Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 57-70.

Huntley, R 2017, *Still Lucky: Why you should feel optimistic about Australia and its people,* Penguin Books Australia.

Ihram, S 2013, *Barriers to Musllim Women's Employment: Report on the Rise and Shine Project - June 2012,* Australia Muslim Women's Association.

Iner, D (ed.) 2017, *Islamophobia in Australia 2014-2016*, Islamophobia Register Australia; Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation', Charles Sturt University; Islamic Science and Research Academy; Diversity Council Australia; University of Western Australia; Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University; Public and Contextual Theology research Centre, Charles Sturt University; Just Media Advocacy.

Karp, P 2017, 'Australians split on adopting Trump-style travel ban, polls show', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 7 February 2017 08.48 AEDT, Guardian News and Media Limited, viewed 28th February 2017.

King, EB & Ahmad, AS 2010, 'An Experimental Field Study of Interpersonal Dsicrimination Toward Muslim Job Applicants', *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 63, no. 4, Winter 2010, pp. 881-906.

Lovat, T, Mitchell, B, Nilan, P, Hosseini, H, Cook, B, Samarayi, I & Mansfield, M 2011, *Australian Muslim Jobseekers: Labour Market Experience, Job Readiness, and the Relative Effectiveness of Employment Support Services,* University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia.

Markus, A 2016, 'One in two favour Muslim immigration ban? Beware the survey panel given an all-or-nothing choice', *The Conversation*,viewed 28th February 2016.

Oliver, D, McDonald, P, Stewart, A & Hewitt, A 2016, *Unpaid Work Experience in Australia: Prevalence, nature and impact,* University of Adelaide, Queensland University of Technology, University of Technology Sydney.

Parmar, T 2016, 'Almost Half of Australians Favor Ban on Muslim Immigration', *Time*, Sep 21, 2016, Time Inc, viewed 28th February 2017.

Samani, S 2013, 'Securing Employment: Experiences of Muslim Women in Western Australia', *World Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 5, September, pp. 91-102.

Scott, G & Franzmann, M 2007, 'Religious identity and 'secular' employment: a case study of young Muslim women graduates in the Sydney workforce', *Contemporary Islam*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 275-288.

Sennett, R & Cobb, J 1977, *The Hidden Injuries of Class,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK.

Slay, J & Stephens, L 2013, *Co-production in mental health: A literature review,* new economics foundation, London.

Standing, G 2011, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class,* Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York.

Syed, J & Pio, E 2010, 'Veiled diversity?: workplace experiences of Muslim women in Australia', *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, vol. 27, no. 1